abstract 051

Wanting universals

Abstract category – oral/poster

This paper is a corpus-typological contribution to the dispute whether **'want'** (also called **desiderative**) is a cross-linguistic universal (Khanina 2008 vs. Goddard & Wierzbicka 2010). Unlike Khanina (2008) and Goddard & Wierzbicka (2010) but like Haspelmath (2005) I assume that 'want' is always expressed by a **construction**. Rather than discovering structural universals of 'want', the aim is to identify how 'want' constructions can be identified given comparable texts and a functional domain. Hereby the task is to find out by which combination out of the large number of all marker candidates in a corpus (both words and morphemes) a meaning is encoded (if it is encoded at all). It is argued that there is a uniform solution to this task: a **procedural universal**.

'Want' constructions are automatically extracted from **parallel texts** (NT) in a world-wide sample of 100 languages texts using a universal extraction algorithm. The sample is biased on purpose toward Eurasia and New Guinea (an area distant from Europe) in order to verify to what extent a SAE-based extensional definition of the domain 'want' affects the quality of extraction. All extracted constructions are manually evaluated with dictionaries and reference grammars. The approach differs thus from most approaches to **quantitative typology** in that quantitative methods are applied at the very beginning before conventional qualitative methods are used.

The automatically extracted constructions are highly similar to Tomasello's (2003) **item-based constructions** in language acquisition. Like item-based constructions they are **constructional islands** (independent of other domains and constructions). Finding an item-based construction requires **local semantic decomposition** ('want' meaning as opposed to all other meanings) rather than the global semantic decomposition of Natural Semantic Metalanguage. Goddard & Wierzbicka (2010) claim that a semantically primitive meaning such as 'want' will always be expounded by means of a **segmental sign**. This paper largely confirms the claim but associates it with the **local cue validity** of such markers (Tomasello 2003: 136 based on work by Dan Slobin).

It is shown that 'want' constructions with considerable **paradigmatic and syntagmatic complexity** can be extracted without language-specific expert knowledge (expert knowledge is a precondition for Goddard & Wierzbicka's 2010 polysemy analysis) with a universal algorithm even though desiderative markers exhibit a wide range of **polysemy patterns** (Khanina 2008). A major finding is that there is more than one dimension of variability of construction types (Haspelmath's [2005] typology being one of them) and that lexical polysemy patterns (Khanina 2008) do not determine construction types. The study also confirms previous findings that **egocentricity** is an important ingredient of 'want'.

References

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